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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #12 (SO12)
(Conflict Reduced in Mindanao and Other Areas Vulnerable to Violence)

Thanks to e-Centers, rural folk get connected

UPI, Maguindanao — Every day after school hours, students mill around the community e-center (CeC) in Upi, Maguindanao. For only P20, roughly equivalent to a 13-kilometer jeepney fare, they can reach the farthest corners of the world or perhaps wander through the most popular tourist spots in Europe or the Caribbean islands.

For 15-year-old high school student Shamera Nasim, P20 is all it takes to "transport" her to Saudi Arabia. "I always finish my research work as fast as I can so I will have time to spare talking to my mom," enthuses Shamera, whose mother is an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) in the Middle East.

Shamera has not seen her mother for two years, and misses her sorely. But with the e-center, P20 goes a long way toward bridging the mother-daughter separation.

CeCs are facilities where, for a minimal fee, the public can access various information and communications technology (ICT) services such as Web browsing, e-mail, voice calls, and facsimile.

These centers serve as community libraries, points of access to distance education, business service centers, local, regional and international news services centers, and portals for various government services.

The e-centers, which look like Internet café-cum-business centers, have enriched the learning experience of students in the area who previously had access only to antiquated library materials.

They have also augmented the resources provided by US Agency for International Development (USAID) to two schools in Upi.

The Upi Agricultural School and the Nuro Central Elementary School, respectively, received 10 and five Internet-connected computers, bundled with useful peripherals, through the USAID's Computer Literacy and Internet Connection (CLIC) Program.

Selected teachers from these schools have likewise received computer skills training.

South Upi in Maguindanao is considered as one of the underprivileged municipalities in the Philippines. Though even the basic necessities and standard infrastructure are lacking, the range of amenities available to local residents are expanding.

"The Upi CeC won sixth place in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Digital Opportunities Awards in 2005. The awards were given to outstanding projects on the advancement of computerization of both the government and the private sectors," says engineer Paulo Cagara, chairman of the ICT Council, which manages the e-center.

The municipality of Upi is the site of the first community e-center (CeC) in the country. Launched in October 2004, the Upi CeC has made progress in making lives more comfortable for the Maguindanaoans, according to Cagara.

The e-center is a government and private sector partnership, and since its operations began, the people of Upi have enjoyed speedy communication services through facsimile and e-mail, as well as reduced phone bill costs by using the new local telephone system.

Most of the government employees, who previously had to travel to Cotabato City to have their documents processed by the Government System Insurance Service (GSIS), can now apply for loans online.

The e-center has also had a significant impact on local businesses. Traders, who once had limited contact and little access to markets outside the municipality, can now arrange efficient domestic and overseas transactions through the CeC.

In fact, locally made baskets made by the indigenous Teduray tribe are being sold internationally through the Internet. Thanks to technology, product information on these baskets is posted in the local government unit's website.

The USAID-funded Growth with Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program, which implements CLIC, is also instrumental in efforts to "wire" the previously inaccessible municipalities throughout Mindanao, especially in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM).

In Upi, the GEM Program provided technical support and assistance in configuring CeCs' equipment. The local government, led by Mayor Ramon Piang Sr., allocated a computer set and a room for the CeC as counterpart.

Meanwhile, in Malungon municipality, a predominantly rural community in Sarangani, technology has also made a stopover. Though only 23 of its 31 barangays have access to power, an e-center was created as evidence of strong resolve to make Mindanao an ICT hub.

With the CeC, telecommunication companies such as Globe and Smart have entered the municipality.

E-centers were also established in equally remote municipalities in Mindanao such as Maitum and Malapatan in Sarangani, as well as Jolo in Sulu.

Besides facilitating broadband connections to these areas, the GEM Program has also assisted these municipalities in accessing funds from the National Computer Center (NCC), which implements the "Jumpstarting Electronic Governance in Local Government Units" or the e-LGU Program.

The ICT revolution continues to sweep through the country, and the NCC plans to connect a total of 248 rural municipalities and provinces to the world.

Of these pilot sites, 74 are in Mindanao. In Luzon, 98 CECs will be established, while 76 e-centers will be set up in the Visayas.

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